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EXPLOSION ABOARD T.W.A. FLIGHT 800: THE OVERVIEW

EXPLOSION ABOARD T.W.A. FLIGHT 800: THE OVERVIEW; INVESTIGATORS SUSPECT EXPLOSIVE DEVICE AS LIKELIEST CAUSE FOR CRASH OF FLIGHT 800

By Matthew Purdy

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Federal law enforcement officials said yesterday that the most likely explanation for the fiery crash of T.W.A. Flight 800 was that a bomb or, perhaps, a missile sent the airplane plunging into the Atlantic Ocean off Long Island on Wednesday night, killing all 230 people on board.

By yesterday evening, the remains of more than 120 people had been recovered, and investigators had begun examining pieces of the plane that were fished from the crash site and brought to land.

The initial swirl of evidence and speculation came before investigators had even begun serious examination of the plane's wreckage that was brought ashore. Based largely on witnesses' accounts, Federal investigators yesterday offered several possible scenarios for the explosion that turned the Boeing 747-100 airliner bound for Paris from Kennedy International Airport into a blazing shower at 13,700 feet above the Atlantic. Officials said the possibilities under investigation range from a catastrophic mechanical failure that ignited the airplane's 250,000 pounds of fuel, to a brazen act of terrorism, like a bomb secreted on board or a surface-to-air missile fired from below.

Yesterday afternoon, several officials, impressed by witnesses' descriptions of flaming streaks and flashes of light near the plane before it exploded, said they were giving serious consideration to the theory that the plane had been struck by a missile. But by evening, Federal law enforcement officials said they had looked at radar records from Wednesday evening and were giving less credence to the missile theory -- in part because Flight 800 was flying above the ceiling for most shoulder-fired missiles.

Still, by process of elimination, investigators said they were finding it increasingly difficult to find an explanation for the explosion that ripped the aircraft apart that did not involve an attack on the plane, most likely by a bomb.

Officials of Trans World Airlines said yesterday that they had no immediate mechanical explanation for the crash. The plane did not have a history of major mechanical troubles, they said, and the experienced crew of the 747-100 did not report any problems to air traffic controllers in the 29 minutes the plane was airborne before disappearing from radar at 8:48 P.M.

Although the inquiry officially remained an accident investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was treating it as a criminal investigation, beyond its usual role in air crashes. Within hours of the crash, the F.B.I. in New York had activated its joint terrorism task force, bringing in other Federal law enforcement agencies and the New York City police. By yesterday, there were 100 F.B.I. agents working on the case.

While Federal investigators, in New York and Washington, said last night that an attack was the most likely explanation, Robert T. Francis, vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, said that "the issue of an accident versus a criminal act is very much out there" and added that "there is no evidence at this point that this is not an accident."

The safety board routinely cautions against speculation in the early stages of a crash investigation, as Mr. Francis did yesterday.

At the White House, President Clinton, too, cautioned against making quick judgments about the cause of the crash.

"Do not jump to conclusions," he said. "Let's wait until we get the facts and let's remember the families."

One reason Federal officials said they were being cautious about public speculation was their experience in the Oklahoma City bombing last year. In that case, early speculation by the authorities that Arab terrorists had been responsible was quickly proved wrong.

The huge rescue effort that began in the dark of Wednesday night continued in daylight yesterday with hundreds of workers and dozens of boats trawling the placid water in the 200-square-mile crash site nine miles off the Long Island coast.

Throughout the day, there was a steady traffic of helicopters and Coast Guard rescue boats ferrying bodies and pieces of the airplane to the Moriches Bay Coast Guard station, where the operation had its headquarters.

Bodies were brought to a garage at the Coast Guard station, then tagged with numbers and loaded onto refrigerated trucks that took them to the Suffolk County Medical Examiner's office in Hauppauge.

Rabbi Tuvia Teldon, who had come to the garage to say psalms for the dead, said some of the bodies were fully intact and others were mangled. Some were still in their seat belts. "The vulnerability of the human body becomes very apparent," he noted sadly.

Charles Wetli, the Suffolk County Medical Examiner, said that many of the bodies he saw were burned but that he believes the passengers died "in literally a heartbeat."

"For all practical purposes," he said, "it was an instantaneous death." He added that out of regard for the relatives of the victims, they would be asked to identify their relatives through photos of their bodies.

Throughout yesterday, relatives of victims continued to arrive at the Ramada Plaza Hotel near Kennedy Airport, where they were counseled while waiting for final word about the list of passengers.

"People were stunned, and they were uncertain, and they were hoping," said Dottie Brier, a clinical social worker.

"They would talk about all the reasons why maybe they were or weren't on that plane. Maybe they had reservations but didn't get on, maybe they were on another flight to Paris, Tower Air or some other airline."

The crash reverberated well beyond New York. In the rural central Pennsylvania town of Montoursville, the mourning had begun for 16 teen-age members of a French club who were making an eagerly anticipated trip to France.

And at the Charles de Gaulle Airport, people arriving to meet Flight 800 yesterday were seen burying their faces in their hands when told the news.

The main focus of activity yesterday was in Suffolk County, where investigators began sorting through the witnesses' accounts of the crash and the recovered physical evidence.

Officials with the National Transportation Safety Board said there was no physical evidence from the airplane that pointed definitively to foul play. But law enforcement officials involved in the investigation said it was their view that a variety of circumstances point to an explosive device as the most likely culprit.

One possibility was that a bomb had somehow been brought aboard. But another under investigation, those officials said, is that the airplane was hit by a missile fired from a boat.

The officials say the strongest indications suggesting this possibility are witness reports of a "streak of light" hitting the airplane just before it exploded.

Fred Meyer, a major in the Air National Guard, who was flying a C-130 off Long Island on a training mission at the time of the crash, told reporters that he saw an arc of light moving toward the plane.

He said it followed "the sort of course and trajectory that you see when a shooting star enters the atmosphere."

He said, "Almost immediately thereafter I saw in rapid succession a small explosion and then a large explosion."

Paul Angelides, who lives in Westhampton Beach, said he was standing on a deck of a beachfront house when he saw what he described as a "red meteor with a smoke tail" that followed the course like the outline of "a parabola." He said he first saw "the meteor" and then "the fireball erupts at that other location, then the whole fireball falls to the earth."

The law enforcement officials also said a review of radar tapes from the time of the crash showed what appears to be an errant "blip" falling with the airplane, although some law enforcement officials said a missile fired from a hand-held launcher would likely be too small to be picked up by radar.

The officials said they were reviewing a telephone call placed to a Tampa, Fla., television station yesterday morning from a man who identified himself as a member of a jihad, or holy war, and claimed responsibility for the crash. They also were examining a letter warning of an attack that was signed by a group calling itself Movement for Islamic Change and faxed to an Arabic newspaper earlier this week.

Glyn Davies, a State Department spokesman, largely discounted the letter saying it contained common, generalized political language "and that the only connection is a vague chronological one -- that this thing surfaced at this dreadful time."

Officials said they have not examined the bulk of the physical evidence and have yet to recover the flight-data recorder or the mechanism that records the conversation of the cockpit crew. Therefore, they said, they are unable to either rule in or out the possibility of mechanical or human failure.

The airplane's pilot, Capt. Steve Snyder, and the first officer, Capt. Ralph Kevorkian, both had long experience flying 747's.

Joseph S. Fruscella, the Eastern regional vice president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, said he reviewed the tapes of conversation between the cockpit personnel and controllers in Boston, who were handling the flight when it crashed. "Everything was normal and professional and nothing was out of the ordinary," he said.

A correction was made on July 25, 1996: An article on Friday about the crash of T.W.A. Flight 800 referred incorrectly to comments by Maj. Frederick Meyer of the Air National Guard, who witnessed it. While he described a streak of light that preceded two explosions and a fireball, he said he saw no indication of a missile.

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